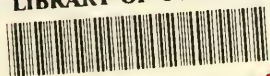


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MEMORIAL
OF
GEORGE L. RIVES
BY
STEPHEN H. OLIN

FROM
THE YEAR BOOK OF THE
ASSOCIATION OF THE BAR
OF THE
CITY OF NEW YORK
1918

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New York 1884



GEORGE Lockhart Rives, who had served this Association as vice-president, and often during thirty-five years upon its committees, died at his summer home, in Newport, on August 18, 1917.

He was born in the City of New York on May 1, 1848.

His father was Francis R. Rives, a highly respected citizen of New York. His grandfather was William C. Rives, of "Castle Hill," Virginia, author, senator, and diplomat.

His mother's grandfather was Thomas Barclay, long time British Consul General in New York. "Nearly fifty years of his life were spent in the public service of Great Britain, and yet he was by descent and marriage, as well as by birth and residence, essentially an American and not an Englishman. He was indeed a very typical New Yorker, of the pre-Revolutionary type; closely allied to the English Church and the Royal Government, but tracing his descent back through three generations to some of the earliest settlers in the colonies."

On the mother's side, there could also be traced a long line of British ancestors. From one of these, a few years ago, descended an estate in England, which Rives sold, and in 1915 the House of Lords, having before it the Barony of Wharton, created in 1543 but in abeyance since 1731, granted a petition for its revival, saying that the petitioner and George Lockhart Rives, who made no claim to the barony, were the present co-heirs of it.

Thus, except a few of the early settlers of New Amsterdam, all of his ancestors came from Scotch or English stock, but for about two centuries most of them had been Virginians or New Yorkers. To understand his character, it is not necessary to go

beyond these lines of American descent, or to claim for him, as he would not have claimed, any quality which did not form a part of his American inheritance.

George Rives graduated with honor at Columbia College in 1868 and matriculated at Trinity College, Cambridge.

At the University he rowed in the boat which was the head of the river. He was one of that fastidious company "The Twelve Apostles," to which in their time Tennyson and Hallam had belonged. He was a winner of prizes, notably the Harness Essay prize, awarded once in three years among undergraduates and graduates of less than three years' standing, and in the Mathematical Tripos of 1872, he was Fifth Wrangler.

Returning to New York, he took his bachelor's degree and one of the prizes at the Columbia University Law School in 1873. He joined with me in a law firm, which, with some change of name and of membership, continued during his active practice.

He was a thorough student. The reports in our library were kept briefly annotated in his clear and vigorous handwriting. His cases were carefully prepared and well tried, but he was impatient of the delay and uncertainty of litigation and soon became chiefly an adviser and a draftsman of wills and contracts, combining, as he did, legal learning with unusual business ability.

Rives was a Democrat, but too independent in opinion to be a strong partisan. He was never a candidate for office, and was interested in politics rather as a science than as an art.

In 1887, during the first administration of President Cleveland, he was appointed Assistant Secretary of State of the United States. Gaining the confidence and friendship of Secretary Bayard, he was given a free hand in regulating the consular system and the business methods of the department and he showed a marked talent for organization and administration.

After his term of office in Washington, he was counsel of that excellent board, the first New York Rapid Transit Commission, and for six years beginning in 1896 a member of it, and thus dealt with the novel and intricate legal questions which arose during the building of the first subways.

In 1900, by appointment of Governor Roosevelt, Rives was

president of the commission which revised the Charter of the Greater New York, and accomplished its work within narrow limits of time and with unhopd-for harmony and success.

In 1902, Mayor Low appointed him Corporation Counsel, and it was his task to bring together and to redistribute the legal service of the different boroughs. This was skillfully done, and the city's law business was ably managed. Overseeing the work of his subordinates and always keeping up with his own, Rives sat at his well-ordered table, a model chief of a great law office.

As a trustee of Columbia University, he took an active part in modernizing the methods of instruction in the Law School and in making radical changes which have widely affected our system of legal education. He served, too, for years upon the committee appointed by the Appellate Division to pass upon the character and fitness of candidates for admission to the Bar.

In 1905, Rives, with John L. Cadwalader and Lewis Cass Ledyard (both in their time presidents of this Association) completed the task of organizing the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations. To bring together diverse interests; to obtain the authority of the Legislature and the co-operation of the City authorities; from small beginnings to develop the great library, with scores of branches in three boroughs—all expertly directed, all admirably housed, all working with smooth efficiency and marvelous success—was a masterpiece of a form of public service which, though needing much besides legal ability, only lawyers can render.

When in 1904 he ceased to be Corporation Counsel, Rives did not return to active practice. He came daily to his office, but he was occupied, as in great degree he had always been, with many things of varying importance—the care of estates, the duties of director in corporations, such as the Bank of New York and the United States Trust Company, the action of the Municipal Art Commission, the work of committees charged with civic ceremonies, the affairs of charitable organizations and of clubs in this city and in Newport. Ceasing to row, he was often a referee in boat races. He sailed his schooner and he was of use to the New York Yacht Club, as, for instance,

upon the special committee which disposed of the troublesome controversy with Lord Dunraven.

He received the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws from Amherst and from Princeton.

He was always a scholar and a lover of literature. The sense of measure and proportion, which made him wise in counsel and reasonable in conduct, served as good taste when there was question of form or expression.

His style in his letters, as in more formal composition, was correct and simple, clear and with little ornament, but on occasion there were touches of humor and sentences that were trenchant and shining.

In 1893 he edited, with careful annotation, the correspondence of his great-grandfather, Thomas Barclay. The book is more than a mere collection of letters; it is excellent biography, full of grace and charm.

In 1913, Rives published a history—*The United States and Mexico (1821-1848)*. It has taken its place among the few first-rate American histories and is likely to be the accepted record of the time. Had he lived longer, he might have continued this story of our diplomatic relations with our Southern neighbor to a more recent date. The book brought to its author the distinction of membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

To all these activities, great and small, Rives devoted himself with the same diligence and ordered effort which had characterized him as a practicing attorney, but he did not fail to recognize their relative importance, and of late years his labors were mainly given to three institutions which are among the chief expressions of our civilization.

He was at the same time and until just before his death, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Columbia University, President of the Board of Governors of the New York Hospital, and President of the New York Public Library

In dealing with the property and the business of great institutions, their relations to the state and the city, their obligations to their officers and employees and to the public, there is constant need to interpret charters and statutes, to understand trusts and

contracts, to apply the laws of property and of corporations, and in such work Rives employed his learning and his skill; but the activity of the lawyer was no longer separable from the broader usefulness of the good citizen.

Rives was of quick apprehension, cool judgment, and firm decision. He was self-reliant and ready to accept responsibility. His mind worked with machine-like regularity and precision and served as a standard for the thinking of those about him. He was careful, industrious, punctual, and orderly. He had forethought and skill in business. He had courage. His friendships were enduring. He seemed little moved by praise or blame. He was free from cant and pretense. His principles were steadfast—rarely expressed in words, but always in behavior. He had the habit of duty and the instinct of honor.

His unusual powers, highly trained, were steadily employed without waste or misdirection, and so his life was harmonious and consistent, without failure and with few disappointments, increasing in dignity and authority.

It was an admirable and enviable life.

Rives married on May 22, 1873, Caroline Morris Kean, of Elizabeth, New Jersey, who died March 29, 1887. On March 20, 1889, he married Sara Whiting Belmont, of Newport, Rhode Island. His widow, two sons, and a daughter survive him.





